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ABSTRACT

This research guide is designed to help teachers and students organize their thoughts as they begin to plan and carry out a research assignment where they review and use the resources of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum (Hyde Park, New York) or other resources for specific projects. The guide is divided into five sections: (1) the nature of research; (2) clarifying your task; (3) actually getting started; (4) developing critical thinking skills; and (5) using primary sources. Contains a written document analysis worksheet. (BT)

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PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY RESEARCH GUIDE

A TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE DESIGNED TO HELP STUDENTS USE PRIMARY SOURCES IN THEIR RESEARCH PROJECTS.

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FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT
PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY RESEARCH GUIDE

This document is designed to be a brief guide to help you organize yourself and your thoughts as you begin to plan and perform a research assignment. We think it will be helpful to you as you review and use the resources of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, or for whatever other research projects you may be called upon to participate in.

The guide is divided into five sections covering the following topics:

- The Nature of Research
- Clarifying Your Task
- Actually Getting Started
- Developing Critical Thinking Skills
- Using Primary Sources

You can find out more information about the life and times of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt by visiting our website at < fdrlibrary.marist.edu>. Our Staff would be very happy to answer any questions you may have regarding the documents and objects in our collection.

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So You Want To Be A Researcher...

This document is designed to be a brief guide to aid students in better understanding the role of a researcher. It is based on suggestions borrowed from *The St. Martin's Handbook* and is intended to be simply an overview of the concepts and techniques used by modern researchers.

Research is All Around Us

The word **Research** comes from the Latin *circare*, which means, "circle around, or explore". And so conducting research is a way of circling around a topic, idea or issue to gain a better understanding. All that we know about the world around us comes as the result of research and investigation. Indeed some of the professions we come in contact with every day are deeply rooted and dependent on research. Police investigations, newspaper accounts, text books, medical procedures; are all the result of someone somewhere having conducted research.

The Nature of Research

Whether it is being done for common everyday application or for broader, more grandiose purposes, all research shares some common characteristics:

Research is driven by a purpose. Researchers seek out information wanting to make a discovery, solve a problem, answer a question, teach others about a topic, advocate a position, correct a misconception or prove a point.

The purpose influences the research. Researchers often start with a general idea of what they are looking for and what they hope to find, but as they progress the focus often shifts. Information gathered may raise new questions in the mind of the researcher.

Research is rarely a neat and tidy progression. The shift in focus may suggest new avenues of exploration. Old leads may grow cold or prove to be unproductive. New bits of information may turn previously held beliefs up side down.

The result of research is a body of knowledge. Good research will yield new discoveries, facts and ideas that will be reexamined and confirmed or disputed by other researchers. From this process we gain a better understanding of the complex world around us.

Clarifying Your Task

Before you begin your research assignment it is important to understand exactly what it is you are being asked to do.

Identify the Purpose. Carefully read through or listen to the directions being given to you. Are you being asked to list, identify, explain, describe, summarize, compare, contrast, survey or analyze? Each of these activities will require a slightly different approach. Be sure you identify and understand exactly the assignment before you begin.

Identify the audience you will be presenting your results to. Who will be interested in the information you will be discovering? What will they want to know? What will they already know? What assumptions might they hold about the topic? What type of evidence is likely to convince them? Knowing who your audience is and how they think will help you shape the presentation of your final results.

Establish your rhetorical point of view. Before you dive into your research, take a moment to examine your own feelings and attitudes. Why are you interested in this topic? How do feel about it, do you support it? Do you reject it? Did you have a desire to research it or was it just thrust upon you? Being clear as to where you stand on the topic will help you understand and evaluate the information you discover.

Determine the scope of your research. You will need to have some idea of the number and nature of the sources you will be using. Will you be using primary sources, secondary sources, surveys, interviews or observations? How many different sources do you need to use in order to sufficiently cover the topic? How timely are the sources you are using? How credible and convincing are they? Where else should you be looking for information? Whether or not your conclusions are accepted or rejected will depend in large measure on the inclusiveness of your research scope.

Keep a research journal. You will want to consider many sources as you consider your topic. You may also consider several different approaches. To help keep it all clear and organized you may want to establish a research journal where you can jot down thoughts and ideas regarding your project. You can also keep track of the materials you have reviewed and indicate which were useful and which were not.

Actually Getting Started

Once you have an understanding of the nature of research, and you have clarified the task at hand, you are now ready to begin the actual act of researching.

Selecting a topic. Sometimes research topics are assigned to you but at other times you will be able to select for yourself. When making your selection it might be helpful to ask yourself the following questions. What topics do you already know something about? What subject would you like to know more about? What subjects elicit a strong emotional reaction from you?

Narrowing your focus. Any topic you select may be too broad to successfully cover in one or two sittings. The ability to narrow the scope of your research is critical. For example FDR's New Deal may be too broad, so you could narrow the focus by looking at a sub set of the New Deal, let's say to the Civilian Conservation Corps. But this too is probably still too broad.

Perhaps a better way to narrow your focus would be to center your research on key questions relating to the broader topics. For example: 'What was FDR trying to achieve with the creation of the New Deal?' or 'What has been the lasting impact of the unprecedented involvement of the New Deal?' are narrower avenues of exploration and will likely yield a more directed line of inquiry.

Developing a hypothesis. A hypothesis is a statement of what you think your research is going to show. It should flow nicely from one of the key questions you used to narrow your focus. It should also be able to be answered through the collection and analysis of research data, but at the same time should be arguable. The following is a hypothesis that might have been derived from the example above: *FDR's New Deal programs sought to bring about a citizen dependence on government.*

Having established a hypothesis you can then begin to gather and examine information and data regarding your topic. As you do so, your research will likely reinforce and /or refute your hypothesis. By working through this process, you will be forced to refine your hypothesis into a working thesis. Your thesis is the main point of your research. It is the conclusion you are willing to present and defend.

Developing Critical Thinking Skills

Developing critical thinking skills is a very important element in conducting and evaluating research. To think critically means you are able to put your emotions aside and determine the value of evidence based upon it's own merit. Carol Wade and Carol Travis offer the following advice for developing critical thinking skills. Clearly define ideas and concepts, examine and analyze available evidence and identify and challenge assumptions and biases. You can establish and accept "tentative" conclusions, but must be willing to examine and consider challenges to those conclusions as new evidence is brought to your attention. Critical thinking requires taking an active role in information gathering and processing, not simply accepting the 'facts' or conclusions presented by someone else. So how do we begin?

Begin by asking questions. The first step in critical thinking is to be willing to challenge whatever evidence you are confronted with. This challenge stems not from a sense of hostility, but from a realization that there is always more to be learned about a subject or topic.

Carefully define the problem. Determine the key issues at the heart of the topic you are examining. What is at stake? Why is it important? What do you hope to discover or learn?

Examine the evidence. Consider the source and the nature of the evidence being presented. Is it reliable? Is it valid? Is it pertinent? Are the arguments being put forth based on opinion or are they fully supported by "facts"? How broad was the scope of the research that produced these facts? How deep was the research?

Consider biases and examine the premise. What biases does the presenter of the evidence hold? What agenda –seen or hidden- might they be trying to advance? Upon what premise do they base their claims? Is it fair and valid? What biases do you hold that may color or cloud your examination of the evidence? How might you overcome these?

Recognize there are likely to be other worthy interpretations. It may be wise to consider other interpretations of the evidence before you settle on your own understanding. Be especially careful in considering the relationship between cause and effect.

Embrace uncertainty. Recognize that your conclusions should be viewed as guiding principles in your understanding of the topic. New evidence should be considered and continually incorporated into a better and more meaningful understanding. Keep in mind that the 'Facts' of today often turn into the fallacies of yesterday. Remember, the world being flat was once considered to be a fact until further evidence came to light. Critical thinking requires keeping an open mind.

Using Primary Sources

Below are some general thoughts and guidelines for using and teaching with primary sources as suggested and compiled from National Archives sources.

- Primary Sources are documents, reports, maps, photographs, letters, drawings and memoirs created by those who participated in or witnessed events of the past.
- From using primary sources, students learn that all written history reflects an author's interpretation of past events. It is subjective in nature.
- From primary sources students are able to directly touch the lives of people from the past.
- Textbooks package information from primary sources, but it must be remembered that a textbook is only one historical interpretation. And the author is simply an interpreter of evidence not a purveyor of truth.
- Different authors will interpret the evidence in different ways, and will offer up different meanings and interpretations. And so each textbook has a point of view that renders it subject to question.
- Students must realize that any account of an event, no matter how impartially presented it appears to be, is essentially subjective.
- As students view primary sources such as letters or photographs, and summarize their conclusions, they become aware of the subjective nature of their own conclusions.
- The disagreements among students, as they compare their conclusions and interpretations, are not unlike that among historians.
- Using primary sources students are confronted with two essential facts of studying history:

    1) The record of historical events reflects the personal, social, political and/or economic points of view of the participants.

    2) Students bring to the sources their own biases, created by their own personal, social, political and economic situations.

And so, students should begin to realize that history exists through interpretation, and that interpretation is often of only a very small and select fragment of what could be part of the record.

- Primary sources fascinate students because they are real and personal: history is humanized through them. Students experience human emotions, values and attitudes of the past.

- Primary sources also allow students to come in contact with the language and customs of the times, free of any tweaking, cleansing or interpretation by an author.

- Using and interpreting primary source materials trains the student in gathering, sifting and evaluating evidence, skills that are very important in this media drenched era in which we live. Students are constantly being bombarded with pitches from advertisers, politicians, planners and bureaucrats. The ability to understand and evaluate information is essential to maintain a free society.

- Students are expected to recognize:

  -how a point of view and bias affect evidence.
  -what contradictions and other limitations exist within a given source.
  -to what extent sources are reliable.
  -the need to understand and make appropriate use of many sources of information.

- Students participate in the process of history. They learn to debate about the interpretation of sources, challenge others' conclusions and seek out evidence to support their own.

HOW TO BEGIN

- You begin to understand primary sources by examining those that you possess yourself, such as birth certificates, passports, report cards, Social Security cards etc. Consider the following questions:

  - What do these sources tell us about the individuals and the society in which they live?
  - How might the sources be used by historians?
  - Consider how school, medical, employment and other records can be used to develop generalizations about student life in the early years of the twenty-first century.

The next step for information would be using community newspapers, local government files, personal diaries and interviews with long time residents. Local historical societies, archives and museums are useful sources as well.

Written Document Analysis Worksheet

(Created by the National Archives and Records Administration Education Staff)

1. **Type of Document** (Check one):

___ Newspaper ___ Map ___ Advertisement
___ Letter ___ Telegram ___ Congressional record
___ Patent ___ Press Release ___ Census Report
___ Memorandum ___ Report ___ Other

2. **Unique Physical Qualities of the Document** (Check one or more):

___ Interesting letterhead ___ Notations
___ Handwritten ___ "RECEIVED" stamp
___ Typed ___ Other
___ Seals

3. **Dates of Document**: _____

4. **Author (or creator) of the Document**: _____
Position (Title) : _____

5. **For what audience was the document written?**

_____

6. **How credible (or reliable) is this source?** (Check one):

___ Very ___ Reasonably ___ Questionable ___ Not at all

7. **Document Information:**

A. List three things the author said that you think are important:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

B. Why do you think this document was written? What purpose does it serve?

_____
_____

C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.

_____
_____

D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written:

_____
_____

E. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:

_____

F. How might this document be useful to historians?

_____

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